

Keeping it secret: Mothers' concerns in dealing with the undisclosed paternity of their children

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Abstract

Children who grow up not knowing their biological fathers blame their mothers for being secretive and alienating them from their fathers. Research on undisclosed fathers has not shed light on why mothers would not inform the children of their fathers' identities. This study, set in South Africa, explored maternal non-disclosure with the specific aim of creating an understanding of women's motivations for withholding information or not introducing a child to his/her father. The research employed an exploratory qualitative approach and used an interpretive approach to garner from narratives of mothers and guardians their experiences of living with non-disclosure. Eight, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with participants aged 33 to 60. Through thematic analysis, women's first-hand accounts could be described and the essence of the phenomenon for all the participants collated. The findings suggest a supposition that there were broader challenges for mothers on how to go about the disclosure in terms of what to say to the child, and at what age it would be appropriate to start discussing the father. The fleeting discussions that did at times occur around the father indicate that disclosure is not a static event, but rather a fluid and an ongoing process. Based on the findings of our research this article provides insight into supportive strategies that may be devised to aid mothers who wish to disclose.

Keywords: biological father, interpretive approach, maternal non-disclosure, unknown father

Introduction

Given the global prevalence of absent fathers, local and international literature has documented a sub-group of children who actually *do not know* their biological fathers (Clowes, Ratele and Shefer 2013; Meerum Terwogt, Meerum Terwogt-Reijnders and Van Hekken 2002). It has further been indicated that these children experience adverse psychological consequences specifically attributed to not knowing who their biological fathers are, even though at times there is a social father present (Langa 2010; Meerum Terwogt et al. 2002; Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Nduna and Sikweyiya 2013; Phaswana 2003). The child not knowing who his/her father is may be due to the mother/guardian truly not knowing, but it also happens that the information is intentionally withheld (Nduna and Jewkes 2011).

Although the construct of undisclosed paternal identity and maternal non-disclosure is not a clear one to categorise, there are different ways of describing this situation. When the mother or guardian has not revealed who the father is, and the child does not know him, this is termed an ‘unknown and undisclosed father’ (Langa 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Phaswana 2003). However, when the child knows the father’s identity (divulged by other sources) it is ‘known but undisclosed’ (Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Polela 2011). At times, the father has not been told about the pregnancy or the child (Nduna 2014). Research on maternal non-disclosure of paternal identity suggests that candid information about the father or the circumstances around the child’s conception may have been made known to the child; despite this, some mothers consider themselves as not having disclosed and the children as not knowing their fathers (Nduna and Jewkes 2011). A study conducted in Australia explored the non-disclosure between partners in a long-term cohabitating relationship, when the mother was uncertain about paternity or the partner disputed paternity (Turney 2005, 2011). Other international studies focused on mothers who remained single by choice, indicating that some affluent women opt to be mothers without the fathers’ involvement, which may lead to non-disclosure (Jadva, Badger, Morrissette and Golombok 2009). Aside from Nduna’s (2014) work, which was conducted in a low socio-economic context, this article describes one of the preliminary studies within South Africa that attempted to include women from different social standings and backgrounds, and explored – from the mothers’ perspectives – probable reasons for the children not knowing their fathers. In this article, the term ‘father’ refers to a biological father. Although various factors contribute to the mothers not disclosing, the findings in our study indicate that, at times, the mother and guardians wished to disclose, but were unsure how to go about communicating with their children.

Why is disclosure important?

The cultural assumption which designates child-rearing as a woman’s domain is believed to have created a considerable space for men to forsake their paternal obligations – financial and otherwise (Denis and Ntsimane 2006). The current ideology around gender holds that women not only bear children but also shoulder the primary responsibility of raising them (Datta 2007). Consequently, when the parental partnership (marital or otherwise) dissolves, it is more than likely that the mother will end up taking responsibility for the children. In South Africa, HIV prevalence among women is twice as high as among men, and with the country’s unmet need for anti-retroviral treatment (ART), women die and leave behind vulnerable children and orphans affected by HIV and AIDS (Statistics South Africa 2011, p. 8). The high rate of mortality among women who leave behind maternal orphans necessitates that those children have access to their living fathers, lest the father can contribute towards raising the child. Children who do not know their fathers reported a range of negative emotions, including embarrassment for not having a present father, loss of identity, and envy of their friends who have present fathers (Langa 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2011). Other studies have documented such children reporting the need to know the absent (unknown) father, even though they may be growing up with an involved social father (Langa 2010; Meerum Terwogt et al. 2002; Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Nduna and Sikweyiya 2013; Phaswana 2003).

Some of the children are reported to be resentful, and blame their mothers for their failure to communicate their fathers' identities to them (Phaswana 2003). Rhein, Ginsburg and Schwarz et al. (1997) document men stating maternal resistance as a barrier to involving biological fathers, while mothers cite paternal disinterest. There are numerous initiatives aimed at encouraging father-child involvement in South Africa. At a policy level, an unabridged birth certificate was recently launched to encourage the acknowledgement of paternity at birth (Department of Home Affairs 2013). Community-based interventions aimed at changing men's attitudes and behaviours towards fatherhood include the projects of Sonke Gender Justice¹ and the Human Science Research Council's Fatherhood Project.² An evaluation of the Sonke Gender Justice fatherhood project within the Eastern Cape revealed a positive change in men's opinions about fatherhood and male parenting practices (Van den Berg, Hendricks and Hatcher et al. 2013). However, gaps remain in addressing the issue of unknown and undisclosed fathers. The fatherhood project revealed that men mainly remained silent about contested pregnancies and denied paternity, even though these issues appeared to influence both non-disclosure and men's non-participation in raising their children (Nduna and Jewkes 2011, 2012). At the time of conducting this study there was only one other research attempt aimed at understanding the mother's (or guardian's) perspective on non-disclosure (Nduna 2014). The current study therefore aims to contribute to knowledge in this area.

Methods

As there was no prior identified literature to guide this research, we decided on an exploratory qualitative approach, as that would be the most appropriate to investigate maternal non-disclosure of a father's identity. The interpretive paradigm was deemed most suitable, as it provides a more human-centred way of generating knowledge about factors contributing to maternal non-disclosure, by making meaning of the subjective data gleaned from the life experiences of mothers and guardians, in the face of undisclosed paternal identity and maternal non-disclosure. This perspective allows the inquiry to make 'sense of feelings, experiences and phenomena as they occur in the real world' (Terre Blanche and Kelly 1999, p. 127). Using a phenomenological perspective, as prescribed within the interpretive perspective, helps place the women's experiences in context. The narratives constructed by the women allowed them to make sense of their experience, which may be useful in revealing their respective reasons for their actions (Kiguwa 2006).

Participants

Our study employed a purposive snowball sampling technique, with the sample population defined as (i) a mother or a guardian; (ii) caring for a child who does not know his/her biological father; (iii) the child never being told who his/her biological father is.

We introduced the study as targeting communities through stakeholders, schools and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and it was also advertised on online forums to enable more participants to come forward. We created an email address solely for corresponding with prospective participants, and a screening questionnaire was created to assess whether participants met the criteria for inclusion in the study. We forwarded the link to the online screening tool to

participants who contacted us via email, and requested respondents to forward the survey link to other women who they deemed would be interested in participating. The screening questions included: 'Are you a mother/guardian?', 'Do you have any children under your care who do not know the identity of their father?' and 'Has the mother/guardian told the child who their (biological) father is?' Responses were captured by choosing the applicable answer ('Yes' or 'No') in a check box. In Freedom Park, the instrument was completed verbally. For more details about recruitment, see Manyatshe (2013).

Data collection

Data were collected through in-depth, audio-recorded individual interviews conducted at participants' homes, while a few participants opted to meet in public spaces. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions centred on factors that contributed to non-disclosure of the father's identity. The interview, which assumed the format of a conversation, as recommended by Kahn (2000), commenced with the interviewer asking the participant how she related to the topic under study. As the participants and the researchers were all women it allowed for a good rapport, as found in similar studies (Nduna 2014; Nduna, Sikweyiya, Khunou, Pambo and Mdletshe 2014). Mothers provided unique, rich and detailed stories which required a retrospective approach, as participants reflected on their experiences. The dialogue was interactive, with the interviewer listening attentively as participants told their stories, or probing where appropriate. The broad categories listed in the interview guide were explored with all participants, but not necessarily in the same order. Issues of interest that arose during interviews were explored in subsequent interviews. Data were collected between June and August 2012, and interviews were conducted in the participants' home languages, which included Zulu, Tswana and Xhosa.

Data management, analysis and interpretation

The first author transcribed the audio. Interviews conducted in the participants' home languages were directly translated and transcribed into English. Participants and people mentioned in the interviews were assigned pseudonyms, in line with the approach employed by Turney (2005). The transcripts were actively read and re-read in order for the researchers to familiarise themselves with the breadth and content of the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Using thematic analysis we were able to identify patterns and themes emerging from the textual data (Anderson 2007; Langdrige 2007). An inductive approach was used. Each response in the individual transcripts was coded, sentence by sentence, and text supporting the code was extracted and grouped accordingly (Anderson 2007; Babbie 2004). Microsoft Excel provided an efficient and user-friendly framework for grouping relevant codes and supporting textual responses in a spread-sheet.

The themes were collated for the larger data set, and sub-themes that did not have sufficient supporting text were regrouped or collapsed. Thematic analysis was beneficial in making meaning of the women's accounts as individual and universal themes experienced by non-disclosing

mothers; notwithstanding their varying backgrounds. Even though the themes were reported in a categorical manner, the life stories flowed into each other, with one aspect influencing another.

Ethical clearance was obtained from the University of the Witwatersrand's Non-Medical Human Subject Ethics Committee and the Psychology Department's internal ethics committee before commencing with this study. Participants from Freedom Park were verbally informed about the contents of the information sheet in a language they were comfortable with, during the recruitment session. Pivotal aspects about informed consent (voluntary participation, right to withdraw, guaranteed confidentiality and consent to be audio recorded) were reiterated. The participants affirmed their understanding by signing the informed consent sheet, and this undertaking was repeated prior to the commencement of each interview. The researchers adhered to the strictest confidential conduct, and research strategies were altered where appropriate to ensure that the participants' wishes were not infringed upon. Potential participants who did not respond to follow-up emails were deemed not to be interested in participating in the study, and no further contact occurred. A referral inventory list was provided to participants and additional counselling services were sourced, upon request. Audio recordings, raw data and a paper trail of this study are available for quality assurance purposes.

Description of the participants

Table 1 provides the participants' assigned pseudonyms and their relationship to the children who did not know their fathers. The participants' ages ranged between 33 and 60 years. Three of the participants, aged between 53 and 60, were the guardians and the remaining women, aged between 33 and 50, were the biological mothers of the children. Two participants became guardians due to the children being maternal orphans, and in one case the biological mother had 'abandoned' the child in the guardian's care. Five of the participants were from the Freedom Park area and three came from other areas in Johannesburg. Seven of the women were of African/black descent, and one woman was Caucasian/white. Despite the limited scope of representation of the sample for this study, the nature of qualitative studies is not to produce findings that can be generalised, but rather to produce an understanding of the phenomenon, as this could guide future investigations and the development of theories (Langdrige 2007).

The education level of the Freedom Park women ranged from primary school to high school level. The respondents' narratives were permeated with accounts related to the social problems prevalent in the area. In the literature, the area is described as a semi-formal settlement township characterised by high unemployment levels, with most residents relying on social grants (Kgobe, Baatjes and Sotuku 2012). These participants were either unemployed or employed informally, and there was a greater reliance on government subsidies as well as neighbourly and charitable assistance from NGOs operating in the area. All the participants from the other areas had completed their high school education and two of the women had postgraduate degrees. On conducting the interview, it was found that one participant (Janice, 45) had grown up not knowing her father's identity – data that were included, as her experience of disclosing to her child could provide valuable insights.

Table 1: Participants' information

Participant	Age	Marital status	Relationship to the child
Charlotte	60	Widowed	Guardian
Martha	44	Separated	Biological mother
Pamela	33	Never married	Biological mother
Zelda	50	Never married	Biological mother
Thandeka	53	Never married	Guardian
Esther	58	Divorced	Guardian
Janice	44	Never married	Biological mother
Patience, participants'	35	Married	Biological mother

From the participants' accounts, it emerged that there was a cluster of children who had physically met their fathers as young children, before losing contact with them. Five of the eight participants referred to this occurrence. Two of the eight participants revealed the fathers' identities by showing the children pictures. The last grouping consisted of children who had never met their fathers. Charlotte (60) said about the child under her guardianship, who met her father when she was younger: *'He is known. She knows his name but she won't be able to point him out.'* Thus, even though it can be said that the identities of the fathers have been disclosed, with some children having met their fathers, the men were still considered unknown and were patently absent from their children's lives.

Findings and discussion

Our general findings were that each participant seemed willing to disclose the biological father's identity to the child concerned, but reported facing challenges, thus countering the assumption that mothers' not telling constituted the deliberate denial of paternal involvement or the purposeful act of concealing his identity. It was evident that some mothers participated in the study to learn how other mothers in the *'same boat'*, *'cope'* with their non-disclosure: at the start of their interviews, two of the biological mothers voiced that they opted to participate in the study, to find out how other mothers in similar circumstances deal with the situation. This article aims to provide some insights and possible strategies for addressing the challenge of being a caregiver to a child who does not know who their father is. The recommendations are based on the challenges reported by the mothers and guardians in our study. From the findings, particular difficulties with disclosure were focused on, namely (i) how to tell; (ii) at what age to tell and (iii) what to say.

How to tell a child?

Participants cited paternal disinterest as a reason for finding it difficult to tell a child about a father who did not want them. Patience and Pamela spoke about having contemplated telling their children, but admitted they were uncertain about how to tell. A talk about the unknown biological father has to be initiated by one party in the mother–child dyad, and participants felt that the child had to ask, as they did not want to be bearers of unpleasant news and in turn be blamed for disclosing to a child who had not enquired. Pamela (33) narrated the following about how she approached the subject; *‘I have always said to myself that I will never [say], “Sit down Kyle we need to talk” [...] why must I come and bombard him while he is sitting and playing with his cars?’* Martha (45) shared a similar view: *‘I could not sit down and tell her ... Then I will be the wrong one and hated for telling her things she did not need to know ... I wanted her to come to me and ask.’* In her statement, we unpack tensions that speak to the experiences of parents living with children who do not know their fathers. The first is a suggestion that this conversation requires a level of formality, as the participant believed each of them would have been required to *sit* the child down and explain.

An additional apprehension was that participants were uncomfortable with the topic and believed they would have acted irresponsibly by discussing the matter with the child. They deemed it an appropriate approach to wait for the child to ask. This appeared to shift a very important responsibility onto the child. The success of such an approach is unclear, as existing studies suggest that some children may not ask, because they might be unsure of how their mothers and/or guardians will react.

Children may feel that by asking they bothered their mothers/guardians, undermined their role in raising them or acted inappropriately, as it could lead to a discussion about the mother's sexuality. Some pregnancies are a result of a single sexual encounter, a short-lived relationship or rape, and these circumstances may be difficult to discuss with a child (Meerum Terwogt et al. 2002; Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Nduna and Sikweyiya 2013). A discussion about a contested, disputed or denied pregnancy carries connotations about sex, and talking about sex is difficult for some mothers due to the cultural and religious contexts which censor such conversations (Mudhovozi, Ramarumo and Sodi 2012). The avoidance of a sexually-nuanced conversation confirms the findings from another sample of mothers and guardians who cited similar reasons, namely not knowing what to tell the child (Nduna 2014). Comparable reasons, which include the fact that the mother was raped and that the child was an outcome of that ordeal, are cited by children who later discovered this information about their fathers and confronted their mothers about the secret (Nduna and Jewkes 2011). If a child asks but does not receive an encouraging response, s/he may not pursue the issue further, believing that the topic is best avoided (Langa 2010; Meerum Terwogt et al. 2002; Nduna and Jewkes 2011).

A finding of this study was that some children had asked questions about their fathers, and from the mothers' responses it could be said that the children understood that the topic was an uncomfortable one. The participants confirmed this, stating that the children had asked once and *‘never asked [them] again’*. Although mothers and guardians stated their wish for the child to ask,

some children were deemed too young to inquire about their father. Meanwhile, some children were commended for their level of *maturity* for having ‘*accepted*’ the mothers’ responses without further questioning. Praising a child’s maturity thus extended to the child keeping this as a family secret. For example, Patience (35) referred to such concealment as a ‘*good thing*’. When Thandeka’s child brought up a conversation he had had with a friend who was being raised by his non-biological father, Thandeka told him not to worry about it, adding that “‘[s]ome men are like that, they run away from their children. Don’t bother yourself with that’, and he never talked about it again’.

The striking commonality in the narratives was that although some casual conversation occurred about the unknown father, participants often deflected the topic and ‘normalised’ the context of absent biological fathers. It seemed that the *children who did not ask were applauded*. The only participant who broke the silence around the child’s absent father was Janice (45), who became pregnant while a student at university. She disclosed to her child and arranged for the child to meet the father. Janice commended herself for having broken what she regarded as her family’s intergenerational silence around absent and unknown fathers, adding the following regarding her own experience of growing up with the silence:

There was this silence that as a child you do not understand. You would feel like you are asking something, which you are not supposed to be asking in the family, and you get to learn that it is something that is not talked about.

Withholding information about the father seemed informed by the cultural script of silence. In addition, the culture of matriarchal families seemed to contribute to the trend where mothers felt the children were indifferent to their absent, unknown father, as it was perceived to be the norm within their communities for fathers to be absent (Nduna, Kasese-Hara, Ndebele and Pillay 2011). Janice, the third generation in her family to grow up not knowing and not being told about her father, spoke of how it was viewed as a ‘*family curse*’, and how it was ‘*accepted*’ that fathers were never there. Esther shared a similar experience: ‘*When you are like me and you are raising children in a home without a man. [The children] are unlikely to ask you ‘Where is our father?’*’ Intergenerational silence about unknown fathers is reported in a study of young people from the Eastern Cape province, who did not know their fathers (Nduna and Jewkes 2011). Janice, who actively chose the disclosure route, conceded that her career as a social worker helped consolidate her decision and gave her the ‘*know how*’. It is important to acknowledge that the privilege of knowing how to handle this situation is not typically available to women. Statistics published by the South African Institute of Race Relations (Holborn 2011) indicate that in 2010, almost half (47%) of children in South Africa had absent and living fathers. Although this figure does not provide a breakdown of men who may still be in touch with their children and with the maternal caregivers, the data suggest a pervasive absence of male figures, which may have become accepted as the norm. In a society where it is more common for children to be born outside marriage than in a marital context, our findings indicate that it is still a challenge to have an open conversation on the topic of an absent and/or unknown father within the familial context. As stated earlier, it is not that the topic was never raised in the participants’ households – when it did arise, it was silenced.

This corresponds with other studies which indicate that children are encouraged to ignore 'him', in a discourse that blames men for running away from their children and frames his actions as a deliberate choice (Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Nduna and Sikweyiya 2013). Mothers construed this as paternal disinterest, despite the fact that some fathers faced challenges such as an inability to contribute financially or problems with substance abuse (Rhein et al. 1997).

Although the combination of stress and the financial hardship of raising a child single-handedly produced some resentment, this did not imply that the father would be excluded for his non-fiscal contributions, as the women were willing to forego the financial assistance to secure his involvement. Pamela emphasised: *'It's not about money ... I have never asked him for money.'* Patience agreed: *'He can come and say, "You know what? I just want to know my son." That's it [!] That's all I want him to do [...] No financial support, I do not really care about that.'*

The third tension in this study was *telling about things*, which is explored in the next section.

What to say to a child?

There was the issue of what participants, as custodians, say to their children about their fathers. This '*confusion*' about what to say was fraught with angry emotions about the reported indifference and irresponsibility of the men, and often complete ignorance on the guardians' part about the men's whereabouts. '*Confusion*' here refers to the fact that the question of what to say was stated as a rhetorical question, because the participants felt uncomfortable about being the bearer of bad news. The things they could say ranged from telling a child that the man had denied paternity or questioned the pregnancy, defaulted on maintenance, disappeared, or was violent towards his family. However, these were things that participants avoided and deemed too painful to say to the child. These findings support previous authors' assertions that the mother's frustrations and avoidance of sexually nuanced discussion bred subsequent non-disclosure (Meerum Terwogt et al. 2002). One participant spoke about how a family friend mediated for her child to meet the father. In international literature on children who do not know their fathers – for instance, children who were adopted or were conceived through donor-assisted conception – parents report on their need for support when disclosing to their children the circumstances around the child's conception (Mac Dougall, Becker, Scheib and Nachtigall 2007). In line with reports from mothers who participated in this study, stating that they would like to know how other mothers in similar circumstances cope, the next section aims to provide guidelines for caregivers who may wish to disclose to their children.

In his autobiography, McIntosh Polela (2011), who grew up not knowing his father, suggests there should be culturally sensitive ways of talking to children about this issue. Parents can be strategic in terms of finding moments to talk to their children that do not necessarily demand the formality which the participants imagine. A few approaches are outlined below.

Parents could strategically follow public perception, that absent and unknown fathers are predominant within black communities in South Africa, and media reports on the issue as covered in *Khumbul'ekhaya*, a popular weekly South African television show about missing relatives. This show is mentioned by children and adults alike in other South African studies of unknown

biological parents as a possible means of searching for an absent father (Nduna 2014; Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Nduna and Sikweyiya 2013). In the current study, some participants understood that undisclosed and absent fathers were quite prevalent in their communities. Some participants attributed the historical basis of this occurrence to the migrant labour system, which made it ‘*acceptable*’ for men to leave their children behind in rural homes as they left to work in the cities. Although such television shows may strengthen the stereotype of black men as irresponsible fathers who abandon their children, these perceptions point to a historical reality. Black South African men’s realities are often characterised by limited economic opportunities and multiple social challenges that prevent or inhibit them from taking up a constructive paternal role (Hunter 2006; Mkhize 2004). Parents can use these perceptions to begin a conversation around absent and unknown fathers, so as to construct a different narrative about men as fathers. The discussion could engage notions about possible reasons for the men’s absence, and be made relevant to the child’s particular circumstances.

Another prospective opportunity for discussion is the school setting. Sometimes the father’s details are required for school enrolments and activities which form part of the school curriculum. The participants spoke about how their children started enquiring about their fathers when their schoolwork required them to include essays or writings about their fathers. Although this indicates a lack of consideration in school environments where some children may not know their fathers, such an instance could be used as an opportunity for the mother/guardian to address the issue at home. The participants reported that exercises that required the child to identify their fatherless status or to admit that they actually did not know their biological father, left him/her conflicted. Patience stated that her son came home with an assignment that required him to write about his father, upon which he enquired from her whether he should write about ‘*my father that I stay with or my biological father?*’ Some of the mothers reported that their children opted to claim that their fathers were dead, rather than face the embarrassment of acknowledging an absent or unknown father. For instance, when Martha’s child found out about how her absent father had abused her elder sister, the child stated that her father was deceased, so as to conceal the *shame* when questioned about him at school.

When to tell a child?

At the beginning of her interview, when Pamela (33) was asked how she related to the topic under study, she said: ‘*It’s so difficult for me to start because there is no beginning and there is no end*’, implying that even though, for now, she has decided not to disclose, the process was ongoing. As discussed earlier, the women admitted to not really engaging with the children about their fathers. As Patience stated when asked if she thought her child was affected: ‘*I wouldn’t know. I really wouldn’t know ... I have never really asked him “Do you ever regret not growing up without your dad?”*’ It could be said because of the limited communication regarding the unknown father, mothers were not aware whether the child was affected by having an absent and unknown father. Some mothers reported that they were ‘*blessed*’ that their children were not affected. The women from Freedom Park elucidated that as the children were growing up in an environment where many

fathers are absent, the children were less likely to be concerned about a father figure. As Esther explained about the 10-year-old child under her care: *'It's still night-time for him,'* implying he is too young. She added: *'He just likes soccer. He doesn't ask [about his father].'* Pamela explained that her five-year-old child started asking about his father when his younger sibling, who had an involved father, said: *'Why is there no father coming to pick him up?'* Although some of the mothers were cognisant that the child would enquire in time, it appeared that their belief that the child was not affected might contribute to their prolonged withholding of information.

Different participants raised concerns about the right age at which to discuss the issue of an undisclosed father. Children in different societies, and within societies, mature at different ages. In their teens, children are curious to discover facts related to their identity, including their family identity. Other participants reported that the enquiry came once the child became aware that their siblings knew their fathers. For example, although 18 is the age at which children are considered adults within the South African constitutional framework, studies consistently show that addressing this question cannot wait until then, as children express a need to know at a younger age (Langa 2010; Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Phaswana 2003). Perhaps once the child begins to ask, some truthful information could be shared, followed by further age-appropriate details as the child grows up.

Making meaning of the women's experiences

At the time of the interviews, seven mothers who participated in this study reported that they were *'okay'* and that they had *'dealt with it'*. These sentiments could allude to the women having accepted their status as single parents, and/or the painful emotions associated with the termination of an intimate relationship and the father absconding, or when paternity is denied. These comments downplayed an unpleasant experience, termed a *'sore subject'* by Patience. Martha spoke about how she thought she had dealt with the issue, yet felt overwhelmed by distressing emotions. Zelda stated that she had no support and could not share her experience with people around her, as that would make her a *'laughing stock'*. Patience described her situation as that of *'a person who is injured and their arm [is] cut off. It's like you are disabled ... You're disabled, that's it. Deal with it.'*

Data need to be examined carefully when studying women's experiences of raising a child who does not know their father. Participants reported that they were fine with the situation, but given their emotional state during the interviews, clearly the topic was painful for some. The women were offered an inventory list with counselling services and the researcher offered to source further services; however, that option was declined. Evidence from other themes discussed above suggests that some participants felt helpless and believed they did not have many options, including those participants living with the fallout of having been in abusive relationships. In her depiction of raising a child without a known father, Patience likened it to being *'injured'* which equated the hurt to damaging a useful part of her body and incapacitating her: *'It's like you are disabled.'* She made the point that the women take personal responsibility for their circumstance, and resolutely suggested they *'deal with it'*.

We made a point earlier about how women whose partners have denied paternity are often left to their own devices to deal with the consequences of children born out of wedlock. Other work (Nduna and Jewkes 2012) deplores this as contributing to the oppression of women who conceive children outside marriage, and the state's endorsement of this through its failure to put in place adequate initiatives such as DNA testing for all, in primary healthcare facilities. In addition to the hurt caused by the denial and rejection on the part of the alleged father, the single mothers also faced shame and judgement from society. This contributed to the mothers not feeling comfortable talking about an absent father. Pamela mentioned how she struggled to deal with the 'shame' and 'humiliation' which she viewed as preventing her from seeking assistance. She stated: '*When you tell people that you are single and pregnant, there is that look that you get and that [gasp] ... I could not ask for help.*' She elaborated how she resorted to substance abuse to deal with her circumstances, and how this compromised her dedication to be a good mother during her child's first year. There was the societal expectation that mothers would learn from having the first child out of wedlock, failing which further judgements would prevail. Janice hinted that this 'shame' probably contributed to her mother not telling her who her true father is, saying: '*[You have] to understand her struggles. My mom was 24 when she got me and I am the third child, can you imagine. You are not working, you don't have anything, and it's your third child, different fathers...*' The shame and anguish of being judged by others is also reported in research with young people who grow up not knowing their fathers (Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Nduna and Sikweyiya 2013).

The data suggest that societal perceptions leave the mother feeling like the scapegoat and make it easier for the father to blame the mother if there is no contact between him and the child. Pamela said: '*It's just easy to say "Yah [!] She won't let me see the child" because it's a very believable story.*' In Martha's case, she felt at fault for being angry towards her abusive husband. She explained: '*People now don't even believe me. They think I am wrong he is right because he is cool, calm and I am angry and shouting. I should forgive him, you see. I do not want things to be like that.*' Although participants were reportedly fine with the situation, it may possibly have been a façade to hide painful emotions. We advance this discussion because participants spoke about their helplessness in the face of wanting the father to be present for the child, and the mothers deeming it 'not okay' for a child not to have a father. Patience said: '*It does hurt ... it does pain me seeing my child growing up without his real father, it does affect me one way or the other.*' Pamela admitted to it being difficult when her child questioned her about his father, and battling with the guilt she felt: '*Like when he says can I have some chocolate and I say "No!" I don't feel bad, because it's okay not to have chocolate, but it's not okay not to have a dad.*' It is important to be cognisant of diverse family formations and the various debates around the importance of a father's presence, for children's optimal development. Some authors argue that for a child, a father's presence is vital in realising a stable identity (Meerum Terwogt et al. 2002). Studies of family life echo the gains of having a present father in the home, as this links material access to optimal development. Anthropologists argue the importance of having a father for both the ancestral link and for protection, especially in a patrilineal society, as seen in many black South African ethnic groups (see Richter and Morrell 2006). Selective acculturation among African people means that

some may still subscribe to certain customary practices and beliefs, while the same beliefs may be of no significance to others (Burman 2003). Thus, some mothers may feel liable and uneasy about what will become of their children who grow up lacking patrilineal ancestral protection, since customary belief associates success in life with having a connection to the paternal side, i.e., through the father acknowledging paternity and the child having the father's surname. This concern, which was evident in this study, resonated with findings from another study (Nduna n.d.). To illustrate, some participants reported that they had accustomed themselves to raising children who do not know their fathers. Esther copes by being accepting in the face of adversity: *'It doesn't really affect me because I am used to this ... I don't care. I have accepted.'* The findings presented above show some women getting 'used' to it and eventually arriving at a point where they 'do not care'. Our findings emphasise that it is important to study experiences the women see as 'touchy', 'sensitive' and complicated, because not doing so perpetuates the status quo, which disadvantages women. When women resolve to not care about the father's absence this may mean they stop pursuing him for maintenance and raise the child single-handedly – often on a limited income. On not seeking paternal financial support, Pamela said: *'Why must I force you [the father of her child], to give your money for something that you do not want to be a part of [being a father], your money becomes meaningless.'* Mothers/guardians may become blasé about a child not knowing their father. Presumably, in instances where a child yearns to know their father, conflict may be created within families where mothers are blamed, disrespected and vilified by their children for not disclosing (Nduna and Jewkes 2011; Phaswana 2003). This phenomenon concerns both researchers and policy makers on family life (Makiwane, Makoae, Botsis and Vawda 2012). In terms of how women relate to their children in these contexts, they reported helplessness and uncertainty when faced with unanticipated questioning about the father. Such questioning hurt them, and the mothers feared being blamed by the child. Some participants reported engaging in what they considered to be *'overcompensating'*, in an attempt to make up for the lack of a present father.

Participants lamented the limited availability of psychosocial support. Pamela stated that there was insufficient support, while any available support was generic. She reported attending *'counselling for divorced people'* which she felt was not right for her, as she wanted to meet mothers who were in the *'same boat'*, so that she could learn from them how to deal with non-disclosure. Survivors of gender-based intimate partner violence had the added burden of recuperating from that trauma, along with the associated self-blame. Participants spoke about forgiving their abusers and forgiving themselves for allowing themselves to be subjected to violence or being abandoned as single parents. Other participants mentioned familial support systems and a reliance on their Christian belief systems.

The Freedom Park participants' main concerns revolved around constrained finances. Further research on this topic should include more participants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, since research from the UK suggests that better educated and employed women were better equipped to secure financial support and to get fathers involved in their children's lives (Kiernan 2005). Some mothers from Freedom Park were negative about their roles as mothers – something which cannot be solely attributed to financial hardship. To conclude each interview, the mothers

were asked to recall one good thing about being a mother, and this yielded varied feedback, linked to their socio-economic context. Martha stated: *'I sometimes wish I could go back I wish I could reverse time and not have borne these children. Being a mother is not a nice experience [...]. I always say that if I could, I would not have been a mother.'* Zelda echoed this sentiment, saying *'there is nothing enjoyable about being a mother'*. Two guardians from Freedom Park reflected that the maternal experience was *'alright'* and *'enjoyable'* for them. Interestingly, all the mothers from this area had an expectation that the children should ease their hardship by participating in household chores – possibly due to the mothers feeling over-burdened by the sole responsibility of taking care of the household. Participants from the other socio-economic contexts gave positive reports about their children and the *'wonderful'* relationship they shared.

Conclusions and recommendations

The findings of this study reflect that mothers'/guardians' feel overwhelmed about living with a child who does not know his/her biological father. The main area of concern for the respondents was how to talk to the child about their father, without upsetting or unsettling their relationship with the child. The mothers were concerned that they may not be able to withhold this information forever, and feared being blamed by their children. Although some participants were keen to tell the child about their biological father, they were unsure at what age a child would be emotionally capable of handling such a discussion. Some of the reasons why information was withheld from the child was because the guardians considered it too painful, e.g., when paternity was denied or the man was abusive. Thus, both mothers and guardians felt a sense of responsibility to safeguard the children from knowing. Consequently, the mothers battled with when and what to disclose to the child, which created a culture of silence around what they regarded as negative and painful experiences. Feminist research aims to liberate and counter stereotypes about women (Millen 1997). A tension that we faced as authors in undertaking this study was whether researching women who do not disclose would attract unnecessary (judgemental) gazes to them, leaving the men in question – i.e., who are party to these circumstances and not involved in their children's lives – free from scrutiny. This article reflected women's experiences in the context of raising a child who does not know his/her father, and aimed to bring understanding to individuals in similar circumstances. We recommend supporting families by encouraging open communication about an absent father. The broader findings of the study indicate that factors such as intimate gender-based violence contributed to children not knowing their fathers, which warrants further measures to address violence towards women and children. The exploratory nature of the study necessitates that more research be conducted to encourage debate around the issue, along with more robust recommendations for policies and interventions aimed at addressing undisclosed paternal identity. A more public engagement with the issue may help alleviate the social stigma borne by women. This may, in turn, foster communication within the homes of those women who wish to disclose.

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Notes

- 1 Sonke Gender Justice link to their project: <http://genderjustice.org.za/projects/one-man-can/fatherhood.html>
- 2 Human Science Research Council's link to their project: <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/en/projects/view/SCLLAA>

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